

## Farming & Wildlife around the Thames Estuary — A new approach

Thursday 31st January 2013, The Horseshoe & Castle Pub, Kent, ME3 8DJ

### Welcome and Introduction:

The chair of the event introduced himself as Charles Tassell, a local farmer in North Kent, and active member of the Kent CFE and NFU. Charles welcomed the attendees and gave apologies for Simon Hargreaves, the North Kent Natural England advisor, for his absence on the day.

A moment was taken to remember the great floods of 1953 which took place 60 years ago to the day. This highlighted the unpredictable nature of the weather, and its ability to have consequences to our daily lives. Charles went on to conclude that the Nature Improvement Area motto “Bigger, Better More and Joined” from the Lawton Review “Making Space for Nature” coincided nicely with the CFE aim for this year, “More intensive, sustainable and connected farming”. By flipping this on its head, we can make this motto fit for both farming and wildlife.

The presenters were introduced as:

Martin Hall – Greening the Gateway Kent & Medway  
Julian Nash – The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds  
Emma J Sheard – Nature Improvement Area Greater Thames Marshes

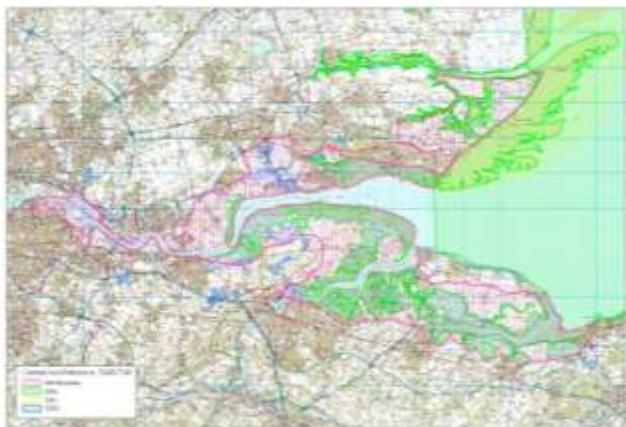
### Presentations:

#### Setting the Scene and the NIA – Martin Hall

Martin Hall, Director of Greening the Gateway Kent & Medway introduced the background to the Nature Improvement Area (NIA) by explaining this new government designation.

NIAs are large scale approaches to conservation which are initial studies as a result of recent evidence, and Professor Sir John Lawton's review “Making Space for Nature”. This document stated that England needed to provide “more, bigger, better and joined” for wildlife to respond to the challenges of climate change and other pressures.

Martin explained that there are 12 NIAs. These were selected from a competitive process of 72 applicants. Each NIA is individual, with different objectives to achieve.



Map showing the project boundary of the Nature Improvement Area (NIA).

The NIA in the Greater Thames Marshes was awarded £571,875 funding for three years to initiate projects for partnership working.

Covering an area just over 50,000 ha, the Greater Thames Marshes NIA stretches both sides of the Thames Estuary from Southend in Essex, through the East boroughs of London, and along the North Kent marshes to Whitstable.

This large open landscape is predominantly farmed and consists of wet grassland, salt marsh, and arable land. The area is known to have both nationally and internationally important strong holds of wintering wildfowl, breeding waders, and some of the few remaining Turtle Doves.

Martin described a series of mapping projects funded by the NIA.

The mapping projects used models to predict climate change, development and species distribution at a variety of timescales and scenarios. These maps have been used to highlight priority areas for conservation.

When compared to the other 11 NIAs, the Greater Thames Marshes was shown to be positioned in a highly vulnerable area. Climate change resulting in potential sea level rise and changes in rainfall patterns will alter the future of the marshes. Combined with the pressure of development, the North Kent marshes is an area highly susceptible to loss of its amazing habitat.

This demonstrates the importance of working here, and highlights the challenge we have to take.

Please see **DEFRA** or **Natural England** for more information on the funding process, or the selection of the 12 NIAs.

Trends in bird populations were then discussed. To measure the health or “biodiversity” of the ecosystem, target species are surveyed. These conspicuous species are easy to spot and highly mobile. In this way they can be easily monitored with changes to the population representing changes to the quality of the habitat. Birds, therefore, make ideal indicators.

Although populations fluctuate naturally due to food availability and weather conditions, a general trend of decreasing populations has been observed, with the sharpest decline between the mid 1970s and mid 1980s. This trend has not just been observed in birds, but has also been seen in butterflies and bats. Across the UK, the state of our wildlife is in decline.

When we consider lapwing trends in the South East, we can see that there is a general decline. It has been estimated that lapwing need to successfully fledge 0.6 chicks per pair per year for the population to stay stable. Currently, lapwing are not reaching this target, producing only 0.3 chicks per pair per year. This lowered productivity is contributing to the decline in the species population levels.

Martin explained that the NIA in the Greater Thames Marshes has the resources to fund projects in the area which will help reverse these observed declines. As part of the NIA a Farm Conservation Advisor has been employed to work in the field, providing advice and support in delivering for wildlife within a profitable business. This includes the Farmer Focus Groups, which will provide a valuable resource for feeding back the opinions and ideas of the farming community to stimulate new projects and funding. More detail of this will be discussed in the presentation on *Resources Available*.

The vision of the Greater Thames Marshes NIA is for a “living and vibrant marshland and estuary landscape where the skills and enthusiasm of residents, visitors, businesses and technical experts are harnessed to work in partnership, delivering more wildlife, more public understanding and enjoyment of the environment and greater resilience by the natural world to the changes brought about by development and climate change.”

The 5 objectives of the NIA were explained:

1. Facing up to Change
2. Delivering on the ground
3. Partnership Working
4. Communication and Access
5. Sustainability and Legacy

The presentation was concluded with the NIA Greater Thames Marshes slogan, More, Bigger, Better and Joined.

MORE: Habitat, wildlife friendly farmland, opportunities, volunteers

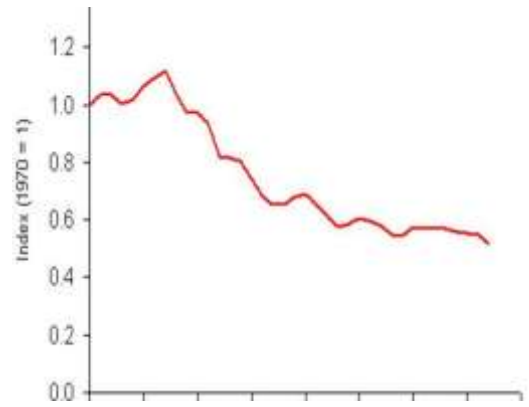
BIGGER: Reserves, Reservoirs, Ambition

BETTER: Land management, resource management, prioritisation, development

JOINED: Sites, funding, policies, initiatives

### Questions arising from the presentation

**Q:** Is there a contradiction between allowing increased access to land and trying to increasing Wildlife?



The Farmland bird index, courtesy of the RSPB. Using 19 bird species to develop an index where 1 represents the number of farmland bird species present in 1970, the graph shows a decline in bird populations to 2007. The steepest declines occurs between the mid 1970s and mid 1980s.

**A:** No the NIA is not trying to increase *new* access to land. Instead it is promoting the existing wildlife and public sites such as footpaths and nature reserves in the area to increase the public access to nature. Connecting people to wildlife and the resources they currently have available is the first step in increasing awareness and support for wildlife and farming.

**Q:** The NIA aims seem very similar to Natural England aims. What is the difference?

**A:** The NIA is a branch of Natural England. Working in partnerships with similar aims can increase success of projects as resources are shared and contribute to a mutual outcome. Although the NIA seems similar to Natural England it is not confined to the same rules. The NIA is focussed on initiating new ideas to provide for both wildlife and farming that can then be used by Natural England if successful.

**Q:** If the NIA succeeds as a successful pilot will Natural England be removed?

**A:** Natural England is currently being re-viewed. To date, there has been no confirmation of what the future may hold for Natural England. Success from the NIA initiative may be used to help shape future schemes.

**Q:** Do the 12 NIAs talk to each other?

**A:** The 12 NIAs are each in very different habitats, so sharing ideas and projects will not necessarily be a strong concept between the NIAs. However, successes in one NIA are shared in a forum that allow the other NIAs to learn and utilise from each other where relevant.

**Q:** What about predator control?

**A:** There has been increasing research into the effects of predation on breeding waders. We are becoming more aware of the issue and open to solutions to this. Please come along to the Farmer Focus Group event on predation 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2013 to share your experience and learn more about this issue.

**Q:** Why are there no Lapwing here anymore? There are plenty in the Ouse Washes.

**A:** As the environment becomes more fragmented the remaining quality habitat can result in concentrated hotspots. If we can ensure high quality habitat across the North Kent Marshes the probability of successfully attracting more lapwing will increase. In addition, lapwing typically return to sites where there were previously successful in breeding. By improving the productivity (success) of lapwing breeding, the number of lapwing on the marshes should increase.

**Q:** This is all very expensive. Graziers, landowner and farmers don't talk together that much. Any extra money is taken by the landowner, not necessarily the grazier who is experiencing the loss. What can we do about this?

**A:** The NIA is always looking to identify new projects within the community. A potential farmer-led project could be initiated to help match graziers with landowners/farmers who need more or less cattle to obtain their grazing targets. If you would be interested in running this group please contact the NIA at [emmas@greaterthamesmarshes.com](mailto:emmas@greaterthamesmarshes.com).



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Large open landscapes of wet grassland are a priority feature for breeding waders.

### **The Future of Wildlife Friendly Farming: what can be achieved – Julian Nash**

Julian Nash introduced himself as the site manager for Northward Hill, a RSPB reserve on the marshes which hires a local grazier to ensure optimum conditions for wildlife. Julian Nash considers himself a farmer, not a conservationist. He states that he is a farmer who is farming for a product, but that his product is breeding birds and wildlife.

Julian demonstrated the extent of flooding management that can be achieved with the use of an abstraction license and a water reservoir on the site. Bunds in the ditches help to maintain water within the fields and can also be used to isolate the field from other units. In this way, altering the water table at the reserve does not affect surrounding farms.

Scrapes and rills provide surface flooding that benefits breeding waders by providing a food resource. Young chicks and adults feed at the muddy edges produced from the surface water as it slowly dries up throughout the season. In ancient marsh these rills are still present; however in most cases the micro-topography has been lost. Capital works can be obtained in some cases to re-create and shape the rills to provide for waders. Scrapes can also be made.

Emphasis was based on the fact that this can be combined with a profitable grazer. Grazing is continued throughout winter to ensure the correct sward length in the breeding season. Fields are slowly drained resulting in drier condition in July to ensure efficient grass conditions for a good season of cattle grazing in the marsh.

Julian explained that the most important factor for delivering for breeding waders is water. Productivity for birds is dependent entirely on the water availability as a food resource.

Predator control was also mentioned. Julian Nash described that as a membership society the RSPB is beginning to recognise that predation may be affecting some sites. In light of this, increased research is being carried out on RSPB reserves to monitor predation to determine its impact. In extreme cases the RSPB recognises that control needs to be taken.

Julian concluded his presentation by answering the question “what does success look like for breeding waders?” Success looks like large scale surface water flooding across the marshes with restricted grazing during the spring. A mosaic landscape habitat with dry fields patch worked across North Kent and used as hay fields and reservoirs for cattle.

### Questions arising from the presentation

**Q:** Does predator fencing really work?

**A:** Yes. Predator fencing can be a very effective measure for controlling mammalian predators.

**Q:** What about birds of prey?

**A:** Birds of prey and Corvids will not be excluded from fields with the use of predator fencing. The best way to minimise these birds is to reduce the suitability of the habitat. This can be achieved by removing tall trees, hedges and fence posts. The open landscape ensures that predators can not use perches to hunt for chicks and eggs.

**Q:** You already have birds using your land. Why are you still improving?

**A:** We want more! The RSPB reserves can be used as reservoirs for breeding waders. This allows hotspots for the species to breed. Once the population reaches a critical level, the birds will spread into the surrounding habitat if the area is managed effectively.



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Cattle grazing is the ideal way to obtain the required sward condition for breeding wader. HLS options HK9, 10, and 11 provide payment for sympathetic management of wet grassland with grazing.

### Resources Available: Filling in the Gap– Emma J Sheard

Emma J Sheard, the NIA Farm Conservation Advisor, presented the resources available to the farming community to deliver for wildlife. The NIA aim to provide the resources and support needed to help guide and advice the farming community. The results for success will not be the same for each individual, ranging from increasing lapwing numbers on your field and wintering wildfowl, to controlling ragwort problems and predation, to making the most of your ES agreement and upgrading to higher paid tiers.

There are a variety of resources currently available from sources such as the RSPB, CFE, Wildlife Trust and Natural England, who can provide advisory material, training and best practise events, site visits and newsletters.

The NIA is taking four key approaches to delivering resources in North Kent:

1. **Care and maintenance:** The NIA has funded a Farm Conservation Advisor to work within the project area. The Farm Conservation Advisor is available to provide free support and site specific management advice. Site visits can be requested. This will include a short walk around your land to assess the site condition, and a discussion on the current management. A follow up report will be produced with site specific advice tailored to your individual agreement.

This will not affect your existing agreement. Instead the site visits of the NIA Farm Conservation Advisor are available to help you manage your existing agreement more efficiently and ensure that you are reaching your agreement targets. Site visits have been shown to help benefit management and provide encouragement.

2. **Farmer Focus Groups:** Hosted to stimulate debate, spread best practise, and provide training and to identify gaps in the resources available to the community to deliver for wildlife and farming. People involved in the Farmer Focus Group will drive and develop the NIAs future as a major, innovative landscape-scale initiative. The group will develop its own direction and decide which issues it wants to tackle. The group will help to identify possible projects for funding, whether it is conservation grade beef, wintering bird seed or predator fencing.

The Farmer Focus Groups will meet three times a year (January, May and October) to coincide with key times for wildlife and farming. The group is a relaxed event and is open to all. Please remember to book in advance.

3. **Supporting new projects and innovative ideas:** Following on from the Farmer Focus Groups, the NIA will apply for funding bids to support new projects identified by the farming community. If you have a potential project, or an issue that you would like us to help you solve, please get in contact via email at [emmas@greaterthamesmarshes.com](mailto:emmas@greaterthamesmarshes.com)
4. **Newsletter:** The NIA will produce newsletters four times a year. The NIA newsletter will update the community on upcoming events and news. Each newsletter will be accompanied by a laminated fact sheet that will *Focus On* a theme, providing a series of compact guides that can be taken into the field.

The first edition will introduce the NIA and the project aims. The fact sheet will be a handy site condition assessment for breeding waders. By taking this into the field and using a non-permanent marker you will be able to record the condition of wet grassland and it's attractiveness for breeding waders. Keeping a yearly record of the site condition will enable you to identify management issues and, over time, help to improve your farm for breeding waders.

Please contact the NIA farm conservation advisor for your free copy. If there are any topics that you would like us to cover, or if you have any suggestions about how we can improve future editions, please send suggestions or requests to [emmas@greaterthamesmarshes.com](mailto:emmas@greaterthamesmarshes.com).



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### **Discussion and AOB:**

The discussion focussed on predation in the marshes. In particular it was raised that controlling for mammals by installing predator fencing can be very expensive. The motion was put forward that the next NIA Farmer Focus Group should focus on the effects of predation and control measures. The NIA is also looking into the possibility of funding predator fences in key areas of the marsh.

Up to this point, the event had focussed primarily on grasslands. Arable fields can provide valuable nesting sites for a range of farmland bird species and invertebrates. In particular, skylarks and lapwing flourish with management options such as skylark plots and over-winter stubble. Small blocks of arable can benefit grassland wildlife by increasing the diversity and mosaic of the landscape. However, large blocks of arable are detrimental due to chemical use and the potential to block species movement across the marshes. Large trees or hedges have been shown to prevent waders from using the adjacent grassland.

The effects of predation and possible control measures will be discussed at the next Farmer Focus Group event at Elmley on May 23<sup>rd</sup> 2013.

## Where will the NIA go from here?

- The NIA will look into the possibility of funding predator fences
- The NIA will be organising Spring/Summer breeding bird surveys to identify sites where breeding waders are utilizing the marshes – coordinated by the NIA Farm Conservation Advisor
- The NIA will distribute a newsletter which will provide management advice specific to North Kent, news and updates
- The NIA Farm Conservation Advisor will be available for free advice – please contact Emma J Sheard on 07540 012 649 or [emmas@greaterthamesmarshes.com](mailto:emmas@greaterthamesmarshes.com)
- The next Farmer Focus event will be held at Elmley on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2013 and will focus on the effects of predation on breeding waders and the possible control measures
- Please see DEFRA <http://www.defra.gov.uk/news/2010/09/24/nature-news/> for a detailed report on the “Making Space for Nature” review.



Water is a key requirement for lapwing in the North Kent Marshes. Scrapes and rills that provide surface flooding are a food source for foraging lapwing adults and chicks.

M O R E . B I G G E R . B E T T E R . J O I N E D .

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